

## Emerging Markets

## Emerging Markets: Zoltron and the Art of Rock 'n' Roll

The enigma operates at the heart of the booming poster art market, combining a wide array of styles and movements into captivating works

Michael Pearce / MutualArt Feb 02, 2022



The booming auction market for rock 'n' roll posters continues to blast record highs. In November 2021, a rare Beatles Shea Stadium poster sold through Heritage Auctions for \$150,000. At the same auction a pristine copy of the iconic Stanley Mouse Grateful Dead poster known as *Skeleton and Roses* hammered for \$109,375. But a new marketplace for rock posters is developing which has nothing to do with nostalgia. These are not advertisements for forthcoming attractions, and never join the messily layered palimpsest on the bill-plastered walls near concert venues – they're emergent anti-establishment art created especially for a dedicated fan base of both the bands and of the artist, commemorative art, part of an off-the-radar silkscreen renaissance, a return to true tactility, and their buyers are fanatical devotees.



Zoltron, Ween in Denver #2 of 3, Serigraph, 24 x 18

The anonymous artist known as Zoltron is at the heart of the market. He is the creator of dozens of brightly eye-catching screen-printed posters for rock acts, including veteran punk Iggy Pop, nineties alt-rockers Ween, and post-grunge Foo Fighters, mixing a postmodern sampler of the psychedelic style of sixties concert posters with unhinged nineties comic book art, brightly colored, punk hallucinatory, and horror-show wild, quoting the trippy imagery of psychedelic designer Rick Griffin, of pop surrealists like lowbrow artist Robert Williams, and producing vivid mutations of pop-culture icons Elvis Presley, and Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka as retro-references to the long history of the underground. "It's a blue-collar collector market... a line around the block," Zoltron said, "On so many levels it's our collective fuck you to the art world. We make accessible art for regular, hard-working people." Pulling from the past, they are pitch-perfect pictures for our postmodern present.



Zoltron, FooFighters May 28th 2017, Serigraph, 24 x 18

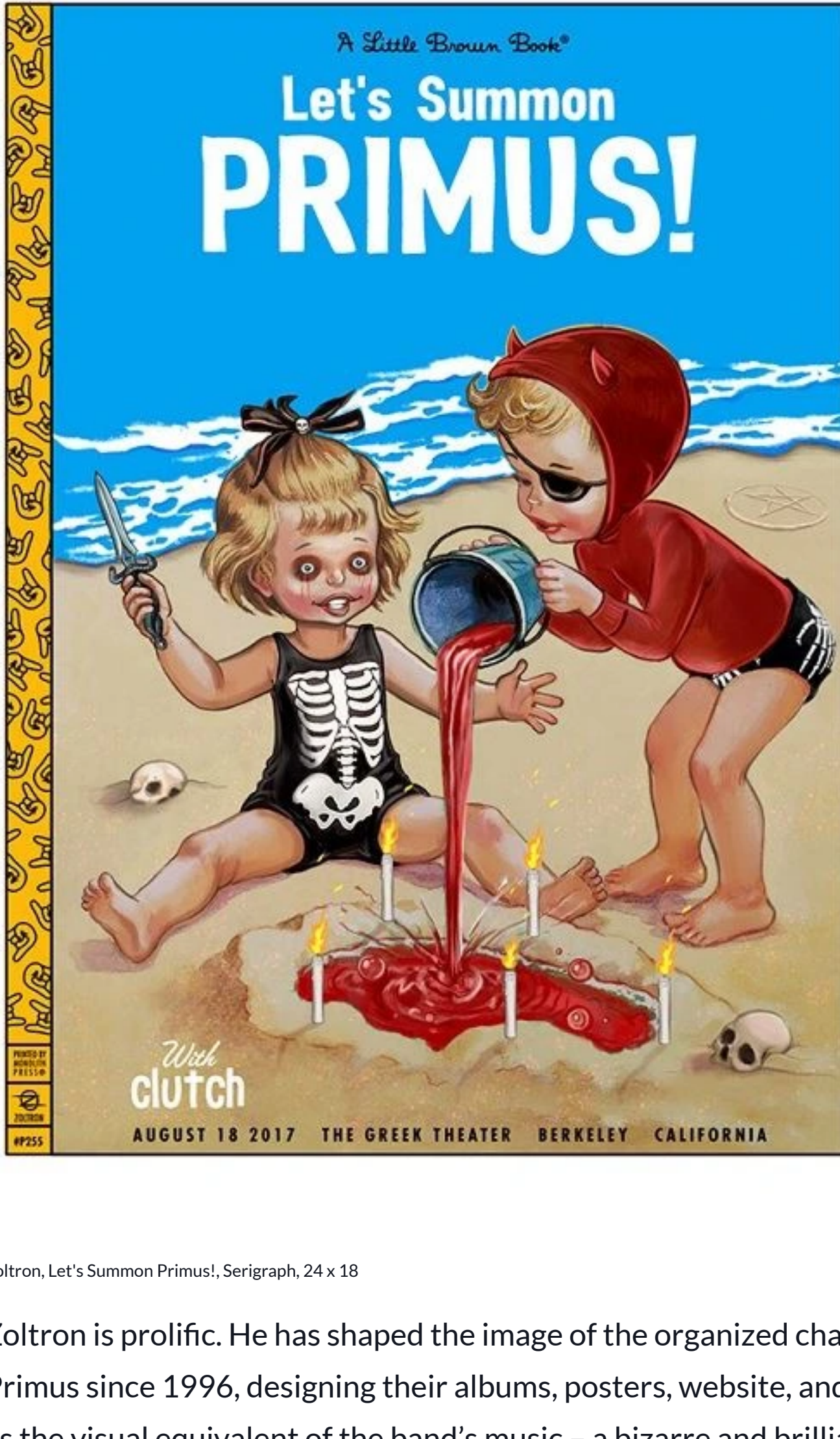
Zoltron grew up in the redwoods of Marin County, where his parents were successful artists. He now lives in the same house among the peaceful trees, sleeping in what was once his father's studio. As a teenager he was fascinated by his brother's record collection – not for the music, but for the art on the covers. Otherworldly Yes albums, the surreal imagery of Hypnosis, the rosy skeletons of the Grateful Dead – the pictures pulled him to them with magnetic attraction, and inspired him to take up a life in art.



Zoltron, Jimi Hendrix, acrylic, aerosol, paper, paste

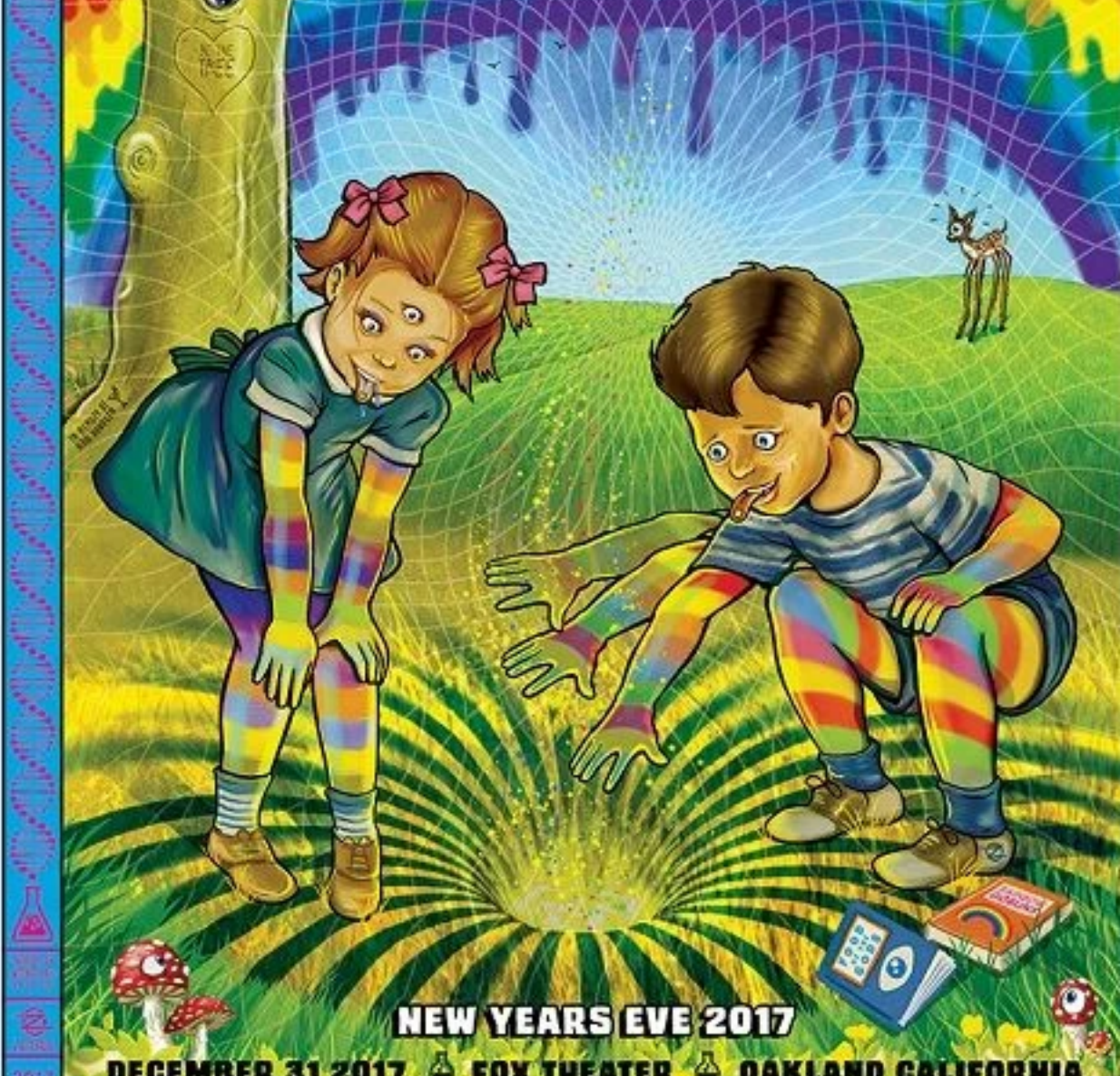
He made his reputation on the dirty streets of downtown San Francisco, where he plastered his designs onto the walls of boarded buildings and the plywood hoardings covering broken storefronts; memento mori murals of dancing and demented skeletons – reminders of our mortality, designed to recall thoughts of making each day worthwhile, and reminiscent of the gloriously gothic imagery of the Dead. His initiation on the street provided him with the respect of the subculture, and Zoltron entered the royal and ragged lineage of the bohemian underground, inheriting the mantle of Rick Griffin as San Francisco's premier rock poster designer and capturing the spirit of the age. He was the first street artist to paint Jimi Hendrix' smiling face on a utility box under an afro bush, repeatedly imitated, and plastered the city with his posters, crafting a backdrop of alienation and humor for the weird contrasts of gilded wealth and shit-stained poverty which characterize the streets of the tech-boom city. His situationist painting of a penitent fast-food clown regretting the obesity-inducing indulgence he had encouraged among children caught the attention of other taggers and soon started a dialogue in graffiti which gradually obscured the original image. The aging and deterioration of his street art influenced his poster design work. He said, "I'm very drawn to distress and texture. Street art changes naturally over time. There are people who walk on it and spray paint on it and general decay happens, and I like to build that stress and decay into my silkscreen work. I'll take the back plate and run it through some abrasion or something that will organically break it apart. I'll finish a piece, then run it through the wash a few times."

Zoltron is mysterious. His pseudonym conjures fancies of possessed fortune-telling machines in darkened pier arcades, promising bizarre and bewildering adventures, or sci-fi villains in retro movies, and he has an aura of that spooky edge. "Early on with the internet I was protective," he said, "I knew that once your identity was revealed or once you had images of yourself shared with the world they don't go away. So, prior to creating Zoltron, I was always hesitant to post any personal information, and I just carried that through. And it works. Zoltron is a name, and a mystery and an enigma. Zoltron's a skin. I meet a lot of artists and I meet people at shows, and they never meet who they expect they're going to meet. Zoltron has manifested to them as a seven-foot tattoo-covered goth guy, or a Japanese businessman..." The mystery magic works – entire editions of his posters sell fast to a devoted army of fans, and a brisk after-market thrives on eBay and social media.



Zoltron, Let's Summon Primus!, Serigraph, 24 x 18

Zoltron is prolific. He has shaped the image of the organized chaos that is Primus since 1996, designing their albums, posters, website, and advertising as the visual equivalent of the band's music – a bizarre and brilliant blend of scatty vocalist Les Claypool's cat-strung voice and sloppy funk bass, and rock-hard grinding metal guitars shrieking over pistol-shot drumming, all played as tightly as Frank Zappa's band. His art for Primus mixes the imagery of hard rock horror and retro pop culture with the acid iconography of psychedelia. It won him an RIAA platinum disc award for *Animals Should Not Try to Act Like People*.



Zoltron, Primus New Years Eve, 2017, Serigraph, 24 x 18

Zoltron is generous. A decade ago, he persuaded Primus to commission artists to produce limited edition, hand-printed silkscreen posters, each individually signed and numbered, using a new image for each of the shows on their tours as the band skidded across the United States. There are now 400 unique 18" x 24" designs, chronicling every gig the band has played with as much hallucinatory color and variety as their music. "The fans adore them," Zoltron said, "it's become a very collectible part of concert culture." It has attracted as much enthusiasm among the artists, who compete to be among the designers.

Zoltron is at the epicenter of the rock 'n' roll poster world. Last winter he showed new work at The Chambers Project, America's premiere gallery of psychedelic art, where his unique screen-prints were hung beside legendary rock artists Roger Dean, Mouse, and Griffin, and historic paintings by Jimi Hendrix and Jerry Garcia; he is preparing for a secretive retrospective pop-up exhibit of his posters spanning three decades at a Californian university this Spring, and his work has been shown in galleries in Paris, Bordeaux, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Portland. His posters are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Boston Museum of Fine Art, and the US Library of Congress. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives has just acquired forty of his iconic posters – they will join the collection in February.



Zoltron, Yolandi, silkscreen on grocery bags and newspaper, paper, paste and paint on oak panel, 30 X 40

For last year's Halloween, Zoltron produced three limited editions of his most demented new-psychedelic posters as collector memorabilia for three Ween concerts in Denver. Designed in the guise of deranged comic book covers, the primary color compositions combine items from a mad underground iconography, from the pipe of Dobbs of the Church of the Subgenius, a slicked rockabilly quiff, steampunk costumes, a 1970's headband, an antennae-headed, acid-eating, sci-fi housewife, Japanese calligraphy, and an old-school, tentacle draped, hallucinatory 1950s cyclops doctor. They sold out in minutes.

There's only one Zoltron.

For more on auctions, exhibitions, and current trends, visit our Magazine Page

### Related Artists

Zoltron  
American

FOLLOW